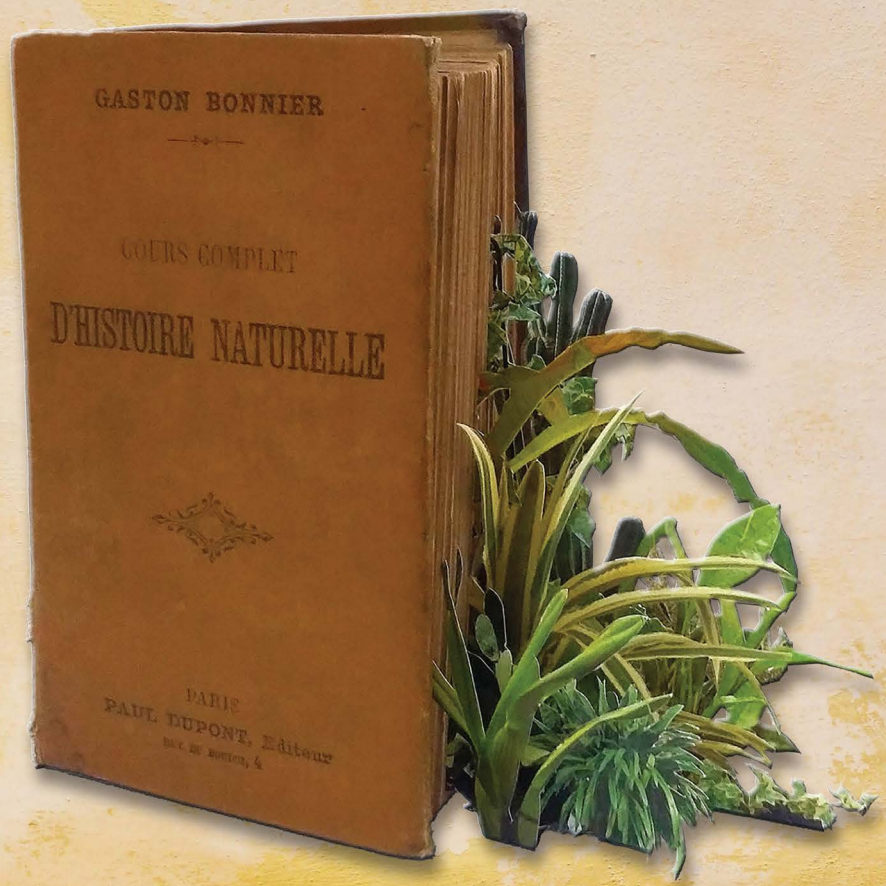
Decolonial Ecologies

The Reinvention of Natural History in Latin American Art

Joanna Page



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1. Bestiaries and the Art of Cryptozoology

Mediaeval bestiaries were among the most popular and influential books circulating in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The bestiary was a compilation of the work of diverse authors over time, reaching back to antiquity, and the texts were often richly illustrated.[1] The genre lived on in the chronicles composed by sixteenth-century European travellers to the New World, who borrowed heavily from classical and medieval descriptions of *terrae incognitae* in their accounts of the fabulous creatures they discovered. The bestiary has proved to be eminently reinventable, registering changing beliefs and perspectives with respect to our relationship with animals, our understanding of what (if anything) distinguishes humans from animals, the nature of signs and language, and the principles on which the world may appear to us as ordered or meaningful.

The mediaeval bestiary was ordered in different ways, presenting each animal alphabetically or grouping them in categories such as "beasts of the air" or "beasts of the sea." Their organization was not consonant with the categories of modern Western science, however: bestiary writers and compilers did not distinguish between animals that were commonly to be found, exotic animals from remote lands, and wholly mythical beings. References to the supernatural abilities of animals were meshed together with details of copulation habits,

1 The bestiary has its deepest origins in the oral traditions of antiquity, which echoed in the works of ancient historians and philosophers such as Herodotus, Aristotle, and Pliny; these in turn influenced the work compiled by the anonymous writer known as Physiologus around the second to the fourth century A.D. This manuscript was translated many times over and widely disseminated in the Mediterranean world and beyond. Together with Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (c. 615–630s), it was an important predecessor of the mediaeval bestiary.

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pregnancy durations, and migration patterns that were unexpectedly precise, if not always zoologically accurate. Animal lore gained through observation was also interwoven with etymological analysis (what the origin of an animal's name revealed about its characteristics). Most often, animal behaviour formed the basis of didactic Christian allegories. The writer of a thirteenth-century bestiary tells us that the hedgehog is "a sinner full of vices like spines, skilled in wicked cunning, and in deceits and robberies," as it makes off with food produced by others to feed its own young. When threatened, it curls up into a spiny ball and hides among the rocks. For this reason, the hedgehog becomes "like the man bristling with sins, who fears the judgment to come, and takes very secure refuge in the rock of Christ."[2] To the mediaeval mind, it was less important to know whether an animal existed than to be able to interpret what it might symbolize. The symbolism of bestiaries was highly flexible and even contradictory, with the same animal given positive or negative attributes depending on the context.[3] Writing styles were similarly heterogeneous, with studious notes on animals' behaviour and physiological appearance mixed with fantastical flights of the imagination and stern admonitions to readers.

The bestiary has been serially reinvented in more recent times, not least by writers and artists from Latin America. Although it dispenses with Christian theology, Juan José Arreola's *Punta de plata* (1959) also resorts to allegory in a sceptical exploration of human folly and destructiveness in the modern world.[4] Jorge Luis Borges found the highly intertextual nature of bestiaries, together with their potent medley of fable and fact, popular lore, and classical erudition, to lend itself perfectly to his irreverent literary experiments. His *Manual de zoología fantástica* (1957, with Marguerita Guerrero)—later republished as *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1967)—is a collection of literary and legendary animals in which brief fables (often attributed to specific authors, such as C. S. Lewis and Kafka) are interspersed with longer texts containing citations from Pliny, Homer, Isidore of Seville, and Milton, alongside a host of

2 Barber, *Bestiary* [*MS Bodley 764*], 113.

3 Page, "Good Creation and Demonic Illusions," 37.

4 Arreola's *Punta de plata* was illustrated by Héctor Xavier and published by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; the text was republished in 1972 with additions but without illustrations as *Bestiario*, the title it would carry for subsequent editions.

commentators from China, Scandinavia, South America, and the Islamic world. Rather like his mediaeval precursors, Borges folds together reality and fantasy in a way that defies any rigid separation between ontological orders: thus a chapter on "The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha" is joined by one on "Spherical Animals" and another on "An Animal Dreamt by Poe."[5]

Julieta Yelin has explored how twentieth-century bestiaries and animal fictions from Latin America have reimagined the animal in order to question the humanist foundations of Western philosophy.[6] She brings these literary projects into dialogue with the philosophical works of Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari and others to tease out their incursions into posthumanist thought. My own analysis will focus on Latin American writers and artists of a more recent period, whose reinventions of the bestiary are more centrally focused on the decolonial and the ecological.

The first part of this chapter will present a reading of *Animalia* (Mexico, 2008), written by Rafael Toriz and illustrated by Édgar Cano. *Animalia* draws on the genre of the bestiary in order to revitalize pre-Hispanic legends and to take up some of the philosophical questions that fascinated writers of medieval bestiaries, including the nature of language (human and nonhuman) and the relationship between humans and other species in a world of close interaction and reciprocity. The second part examines bestiaries published by the Chilean artist Claudio Romo Torres, including *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos* (with texts by Juan Nicolás Padrón, 2008) and *Bestiario mexicano* (written and illustrated by Romo, 2018). Romo's books resurrect the fabulous beasts described by mediaeval and early modern writers and explorers, adding new variants of his own. They reflect on the exclusions on which European conceptions of modernity and civilization are founded and explore an alternative modernity that is ordered around the plural ontologies of Mesoamerican cosmologies. In the third part, I discuss two series created by the Brazilian artist Walmor Corrêa, *Natureza perversa* (2003) and *Unheimlich, imaginário popular brasileiro* (2005). These

5 The chapter titles are taken from the English version of the book, translated by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni. Borges and Guerrero, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*.

6 Yelin, *La letra salvaje*, 15. Among the writers whose novels and short stories form Yelin's corpus are Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, Clarice Lispector, Juan José Arreola, João Guimarães Rosa, Augusto Monterroso, and Wilson Bueno.

portray fantastical animal figures from early colonial accounts and indigenous legends with anatomical precision, reinserting the fabulous, the folkloric, and the popular into the visual idiom of modern Western science. Corrêa's (re)invention of hybrids and cryptids challenges the separation of modern science from popular forms of knowledge and experience, and reappropriates colonial fantasies in order to re-enchant the natural world.

My approach to these texts is guided by a hypothesis: that the bestiary has acquired a new relevance in the twenty-first century in the context of the ecological and existential crisis that pervades the technologically developed, urbanized, globalized world. If the mediaeval bestiary promoted a view of the universe that was intimately interconnected, recent research in biology and ecology has similarly demonstrated the complex interdependence of species and their environments, countering the greater emphasis on individual species in nineteenth- and twentieth-century zoology. We now understand that both signification and knowledge are cognitively and affectively embedded in material environments. At a time when city dwellers have never been more estranged from animals, we are beginning to grasp in a deeper way how integrated our own lives are with those of other species, and how reliant our wellbeing is on their continued existence. Modern-day bestiaries—such as those composed by Toriz and Cano, Romo, and Corrêa—challenge us to question received ideas about human exceptionalism and to imagine our role in a post-anthropocentric era of greater cooperation between different species. They also contest dominant images of an exhausted, frail nature, pointing to the need to re-enchant nature, following its wholesale rationalization and commodification in Western modernity. The popular and indigenous myths that these bestiaries revive and mobilize are not confined to the past or to a timeless present, but actively illuminate the historical and ongoing consequences of colonialism and global capitalism on human and nonhuman animals.

Animalia: The Case for Anthropomorphism in an Age of Mass Extinction

A compendium of short texts, *Animalia* recalls the eclecticism of many mediaeval bestiaries: it includes not only animals—real, extinct, or imaginary—but also philosophers (Cratylus), figures of speech (the *metáfora*), and metaphysical entities (such as the *cronotopo*, which digs immense holes connecting time and space). Like earlier composers of bestiaries, Rafael Toriz supports his observations with citations from Pliny, Aelian, Isidore of Seville, and other authorities of the ancient world. To these he adds several (mostly Latin American) authors to the canon, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Horacio Quiroga, and Julio Cortázar, as well as other sources of knowledge, including Mesoamerican folklore and contemporary neurobiology. Structured on a principle of diversity, the bestiary typically deals with singularities rather than systems; the fragments from which it is composed do not obey a sequential logic. Toriz's aim was to create a similarly diverse space that would accommodate the *transgenérico*, crossing genres and genders.[7]

Appropriately, Édgar Cano's accompanying illustrations do not set real animals apart from legendary ones. Many of the figures are given a dense materiality, unlike the flattened images that adorned the manuscripts of illustrated mediaeval bestiaries or the airy, transparent sketches by Héctor Xavier that accompanied Arreola's *Punta de plata*, perhaps the most important precursor to *Animalia* in the modern Mexican context. The effect of density results from the use of lithography in most of the images to print a heavy, dark background tint, which contrasts with the lighter lines and textures drawn onto the plate. This technique lends a solid verisimilitude to animals that are often described in more mystical or metaphysical terms, such as the *cronotopo* (see Fig. 1.1). These are not naturalistic drawings of the kind one might find in a zoology book, however. While some animal forms are represented with greater precision, starkly figured against a plain background, others emerge as smudges from hazy textures or appear grainy, as if they were images of objects seen through a microscope.

7 Luna, "La voz interrogada," 3.

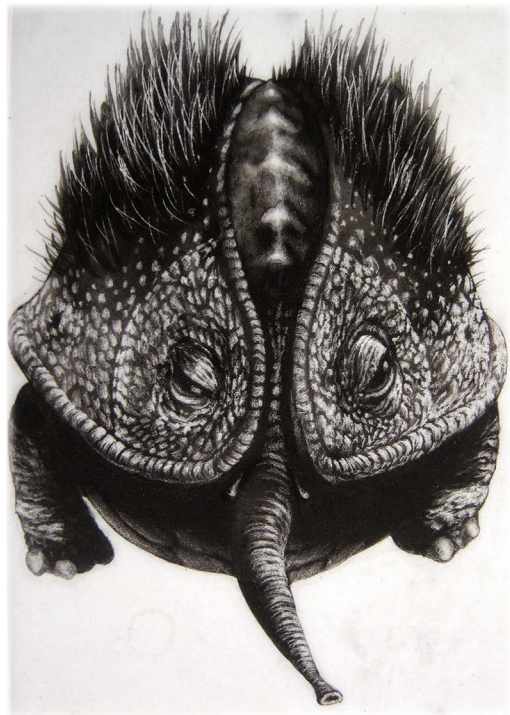

Fig. 1.1 Édgar Cano, 'Cronotopo' from *Animalia*, written by Rafael Toriz and illustrated by Édgar Cano (Mexico City: Vanilla Planifolia, 2015), 15.

Like many bestiaries—especially those that drew extensively on Isidore of Seville's seventh-century *Etymologies*—*Animalia* presents a philosophy of language as well as an account of the natural and spiritual worlds. The inclusion of Cratylus, whose description is falsely ascribed to the *Aberdeen Bestiary*, the *Historia Animalium*, and other ancient texts, brings to the fore the debates over language referenced in *Animalia*. Plato's Cratylus adopts a position of extreme naturalism, claiming that "he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them," or in other words, that language faithfully names the essence of things and is not arbitrary.[8] This was the belief that led writers of bestiaries to preface their descriptions with an analysis of the linguistic origins of the animal's name, which encoded the essence of the animal's character and behaviour: to turn to etymology as a source of zoological knowledge.

8 Plato, *Cratylus*.

Toriz generally parodies the view that human language can tell us something important about animal experience, focusing instead on what animal experience can tell us about human language. In his text on the crocodile, he cites recent research by the neuroscientist Daphne Soares on the pigmented nodules to be found on the skin of some crocodile species. These have been shown to act as sensory organs, allowing the crocodile to detect the presence of a potential meal causing ripples in the water.[9] In *Animalia*, the crocodile informs us that his sensors are not only used for hunting; when the night is beautiful and the waters calm, they also emit a delicate chamber music. Importantly, the crocodile reflects that "*Al igual que los hombres*, mi cuerpo se torna en el primer y último umbral de la significación" (*Just as for humans*, my body becomes the first and last threshold of signification).[10] The act of creating meaning does not take place in a rational mind that is divisible from embodied experience; like all animals, we communicate and understand through our bodies.

A similar reminder of our animal nature comes in Toriz's assertion that "somos descendientes directos del extincto iguanodon y primas terceras de los arcosaurios. Quien mira con detenimiento, observa en nuestro cuerpo el pasado fascinante del planeta" (we are direct descendants of the extinct iguanodon and third cousins of the archosaurs. Whoever looks carefully will observe in our body the fascinating past of the planet).[11] It is an image fit for a post-anthropocentric sensibility, in which human exceptionalism dissolves as we are reminded of our reptilian heritage. As if to emphasize the common ancestry of all mammals and reptiles, Cano's illustrations are notably serpentine, with coiled tails and writhing bodies; even the giraffe's long neck is looped snake-like around its feet (see Fig. 1.2). The absence of colour in these greyscale images—save for a vivid red colour wash on some pages—focuses the eye on the textures they create. Although the illustrations are printed in their entirety in a small format at the back of the book, within its pages we are often only shown an enlarged detail from each, with the images exceeding the margins of the page. This draws us into a close encounter with coarse, wrinkled, scaly, bristly skins.

9 Soares, "An Ancient Sensory Organ in Crocodilians."

10 Toriz and Cano, *Animalia*, 16; my emphasis.

11 Toriz and Cano, 13. Most scientists hold that mammals are not direct descendents of dinosaurs but that we share a common ancestor.

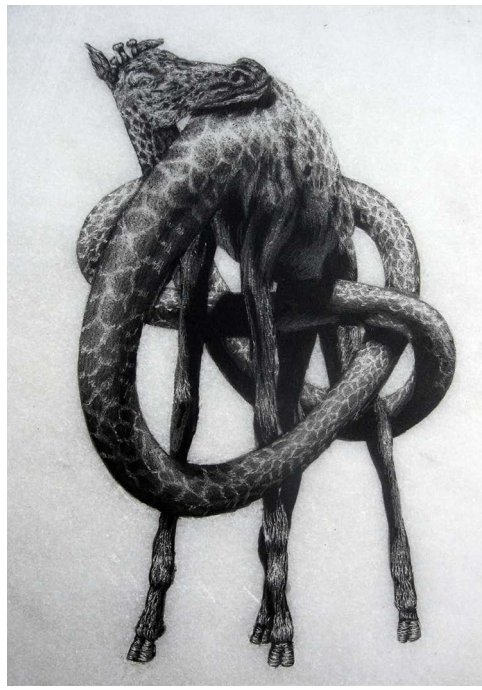

Fig. 1.2 Édgar Cano, 'La jirafa' from *Animalia*, written by Rafael Toriz and illustrated by Édgar Cano (Mexico City: Vanilla Planifolia, 2015), 17.

In classical and medieval times, the bestiary offered explanations of the world in which animals became metaphors for broader natural or divine forces and exemplars in the teaching of morality, such as the swan that holds its neck high "like a proud man drawn along by the vanity of the world."[12] Human qualities of wisdom, timidity, or courage were ascribed to animals in the writings of ancient philosophers that formed the inspiration for many medieval bestiaries. Toriz comically exaggerates the anthropomorphic tendencies of these texts: his wasp, for example, is a brilliant catechist who knows his Seneca well and preaches God's word wherever he can. We have grown suspicious in more recent times of the anthropomorphism that animates so many of our metaphors. In his essay on the alterity of the animal, Derrida asserts that fables should be avoided, as "We know the history of fabulation and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication.

12 Barber, *Bestiary* [*MS Bodley 764*], 135.

Always a discourse of man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and as man."[13] A deeply human-centred perspective certainly informs the claim in a thirteenth-century bestiary known as *MS Bodley 764* that nature "brings forth creatures [...] to instruct us and confirm us in the faith."[14]

For John Berger, however, the anthropomorphism of metaphors and fables was an expression of the imbrication of our everyday lives with those of animals. He argues that until the nineteenth century, "animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man."[15] As a result of this close proximity with animals, "The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal."[16] It was to animals that humans looked for explanations, and animals "lent their name or character" to the qualities of a mysterious world.[17] Until the nineteenth century, anthropomorphism was "integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity."[18] Since the advance of industrial capitalism, however, animals have disappeared from our world, and in this new separation from them, Berger finds that "anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy."[19]

In many contemporary bestiaries, Toriz's among them, anthropomorphic techniques are used to re-entwine those human and animal lives that have become estranged through modernization. In the tangled web of correspondences woven in mediaeval bestiaries, however, humans and animals were bound not only by the anthropomorphic but also by the zoomorphic. A figure common to many texts was the honest working woman who imitates the nightingale in her diligent devotion to her children.[20] The zoomorphic also shapes texts in *Animalia*: maenads (the female followers of Dionysius) are described as "animales altamente sociables" (highly sociable animals) but also as sexually voracious flesh-eating hunters.[21] Cano's illustrations draw attention to

13 Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," 405.
14 Barber, *Bestiary* [*MS Bodley 764*], 121.
15 Berger, *About Looking*, 3.
16 Berger, 7.
17 Berger, 8–9.
18 Berger, 11.
19 Berger, 11.
20 See Barber, *Bestiary* [*MS Bodley 764*], 158; White, *The Book of Beasts*, 140.
21 Toriz and Cano, *Animalia*, 72.

the centrality of animals in human culture and art since ancient times by representing animals as if they had already been inscribed in other forms of media, often painting or sculpture. Some illustrations make use of pointillist effects or evoke the fluidity of water colours, while the darkened tones of many of his images recall the begrimed folds and façades of aged statues or engraving; indeed, the *ahuizotl* is depicted as if it were an Aztec stone sculpture (see Fig. 1.3). This technique of remediation points simultaneously to an absence: these illustrations are images of images that merely evoke the animals they substitute.

Fig. 1.3 Édgar Cano, 'Ahuizotl' from *Animalia*, written by Rafael Toriz and illustrated by Édgar Cano (Mexico City: Vanilla Planifolia, 2015), 76.

Throughout *Animalia*, Toriz describes a natural world—like that of the mediaeval bestiary—that is shaped by myriad imitations and

correspondences to such a degree that the essence and character of all animals, including humans, is intensely relational. This means that the loss of a species is not a footnote in the history of evolution but a diminishment of the sensory, cognitive, or affective experience of other species. Toriz expresses this idea in a compelling way in an entry on the *macaco muriquí* (woolly spider monkey), the name given to two species of the largest primate in South America, both now endangered, largely as a result of hunting and deforestation in Brazil. In a playfully alliterative text, Toriz addresses the monkey:

> Mientras mucho masculles más modelas mi memoria. [...] Mejor, mientras mantengas momentos memorables (maravillosos) mantendremos moderados mares, moluscos minúsculos, manifiestos malthusianistas.[22] Mirado minuciosamente, mientras mucho masculles, mejor mundo moramos.[23]
>
> Your many mutterings mould my memory. [...] Better said, while you maintain memorable (marvellous) moments we will maintain moderate seas, miniscule molluscs, Malthusian manifestos. Monitored meticulously, while you mutter, we dwell in a better world.

Toriz's text follows a poetic logic here rather than a strictly ecological one, of course, but it does convey the interdependence of a world in which the preservation of forests has a direct impact on sea levels. The monkey is described here as moulding human memory in a way that suggests that our cognitive processes are not independent of our relationship with other species.

Until new forms of classification emerged in the seventeenth century, animals tended to be described and categorized with reference to humans: according to their usefulness (for food or medicine) or their value as moral symbols. In his work on changing relationships with the natural world in early modern England, Keith Thomas suggests that the symbolism attached to animals and plants was tied to "the ancient assumption that man and nature were locked into one interacting world." The myriad "analogies and correspondences between the species" meant that "human fortunes could be sympathetically expressed, influenced,

22 Today, neo-Malthusianism often takes the form of advocating for population control to limit environmental damage and to protect resources for other species as well as humans.

23 Toriz and Cano, *Animalia*, 18.

and even foretold by plants, birds and animals."[24] In contrast, the new systems of classification developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century epitomized a new form of looking at things that was "more detached, more objective, less man-centred than that of the past."[25] We are becoming acutely aware of the cost of this detachment, however. In privileging structure over function and separating out objects of study from their place within a complex ecology, modern taxonomies record nothing of the central role that animals have played in shaping human language and experience until very recent times. In this context, *Animalia*—like many other contemporary bestiaries—revives that vision of an interacting world whose importance we are beginning to grasp again.

This world is not devoid of conflict. Toriz's animals do not only live in close relationship with humans but also threaten us, penetrating our bodies to bury themselves in our flesh to live inside us or to reproduce. Toriz builds on the ancient legend of the *rémora* (a suckerfish), thought to attach itself to boats to slow them down. He creates a rather more intimate and sinister variant, claiming that postmortems have revealed that uncaring men live with a tiny *rémora* lodged near the heart. He also replays the myth of the *tlaconete*, in appearance rather like a salamander, which invades unsuspecting women who bathe in the river to lay its eggs in their entrails. In a humorous tone, he warns the reader of the dangers of an escaped *axolotl* armed with large-calibre weapons, a knowledge of terrorist tactics, and a deep-rooted class consciousness.[26]

The many legends in *Animalia* that cast animals as threats to humans seem oddly quaint in an age of mass anthropogenic extinction. (We may note that most species of *tlaconete* found in Mexico are at risk and the *axolotl* is critically endangered.) *Animalia* takes us back to the worldview

24 Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 75.

25 Thomas, 52.

26 Here Toriz makes ludic reference to the presence of the *axolotl* in previous literary works, in which the creature becomes emblematic of Mexican identity. Echoing the *axolotl*'s description in Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, which emphasizes its biological and sexual ambiguity, Octavio Paz explores in his poem *Salamandra* (1962) the creature's doubling and self-transforming qualities, which also arise from the contradictory legends surrounding the god Xólotl in Aztec mythology. For José Emilio Pacheco in *El reposo del fuego* (1966), the *axolotl* "es nuestro emblema. Encarna / el temor de no ser nadie" (is our emblem. It embodies / the fear of being nobody). *El reposo del fuego*, 48.

of the mediaeval bestiary in which species were engaged in continual battles of wit and might with each other in a world designed to produce a parity of forces. In this world, humans were both the hunters and the hunted. Toriz's description of the hyena, an animal that lives close to cemeteries and deceives humans with its calls for help only to devour them, closely follows the account given in many mediaeval texts, including *MS Bodley 764*. This manuscript is typical of bestiaries of its time in its depiction of a certain kind of harmony that results from a balance of power: "For the Creator of all things has made nothing for which there is not an antidote."[27] Toriz creates a world that is similarly sustained by "el equilibrio de las especies" (the balance between species) and in which humans are not necessarily dominant.[28] He invents the *dongui*, a species more powerful than humans, that will spread across the world in a similar wave of urbanization (Paris, London, New York) with the aim of eradicating humans and their customs.[29] To reimagine an era when animals presented a threat to humans becomes an act of nostalgia or of consolation, perhaps, at a time when our actions are fast producing their disappearance.

Indeed, many of Toriz's animals speak to us from the other side of death, bearing witness to their own extinction as well as to human acts of violence against fellow humans. The *ahuizotl* is a legendary creature from Aztec mythology, rather like a dog, who lived on the edge of the lake and drew people to watery deaths. According to some versions, the *ahuizotl* is the guardian of the fish in the lake. In Toriz's work, the *ahuizotl* becomes an eye-witness to the burning of the "purest civilization," the city on the lake, and the deadly advance of a skin disease among its inhabitants. The reference here is to the conquest of Tenochtitlán (now the site of Mexico City) by Cortés and his men, and the epidemic of smallpox they unleashed. The last of the *ahuizotl* species dies drinking from the poisoned lake, having seen the city in flames and its temples awash with blood. Toriz's rewriting of the myth of the *ahuizotl* thus highlights the historical relationship between colonialism, violence, and ecological destruction.

27 Barber, *Bestiary* [*MS Bodley 764*], 184.
28 Toriz and Cano, *Animalia*, 28.
29 Toriz and Cano, 43.

The final image in *Animalia* is a blank page, cut away at the foot to reveal the image of a page from another book (see Fig. 1.4). It is fitting that this highly intertextual bestiary should end with the reproduction of a book by another writer. The author in question is Julio Cortázar, and the text duplicated is from "Polonia y El Salvador: Mayúsculas y minúsculas" (1982). In this essay, Cortázar criticizes the support given by the US to the Salvadoran army, which facilitated even greater violence toward civilians during the Civil War that had started in 1979. He also denounces the little attention paid in the international media to the thousands of deaths and disappearances that were taking place as a result of the conflict. To learn anything about the role of the US in the violence, he laments, "hay que buscar casi al pie de una página interior hasta encontrar algún eco de ese genocidio infinitamente monstruoso" (one has to look almost at the bottom of an inside page to find any mention of that infinitely monstrous genocide).[30] This is the phrase that Toriz allows us to glimpse, partially, behind the page of his own book. The veiled epilogue gives us pause to reflect. What is the truly monstrous here? Hidden, perhaps, in the inside pages of his own text? Amid the various duplicitous and deadly creatures he describes, it is clear that none is capable of the genocide unleashed by Hernán Cortés and his allies in the conquest of Cholula and Tenochtitlán, nor of the ecological and cultural destruction that ensued in the valley of Mexico.[31] *Animalia* harks back to the vibrant imagery of the mediaeval bestiary and its world of signs and wonders. But it is also a text for our own time, one that is increasingly and painfully aware of the terrible cost of our physical, spiritual, cognitive, and affective separation from animals and the rest of the natural world, and how that separation has been sealed with the violence of colonialism and global capitalism.

Claudio Romo: Correspondences and Co-Essences, Myths and Metamorphs

Claudio Romo's illustrated texts evoke the myriad compendia and cabinets of curiosities in which marvels of the natural world were

30 Cortázar, "Polonia y El Salvador," 333.

31 On the ecological consequences of the conquest of Mexico, see Melville, *A Plague of Sheep*.

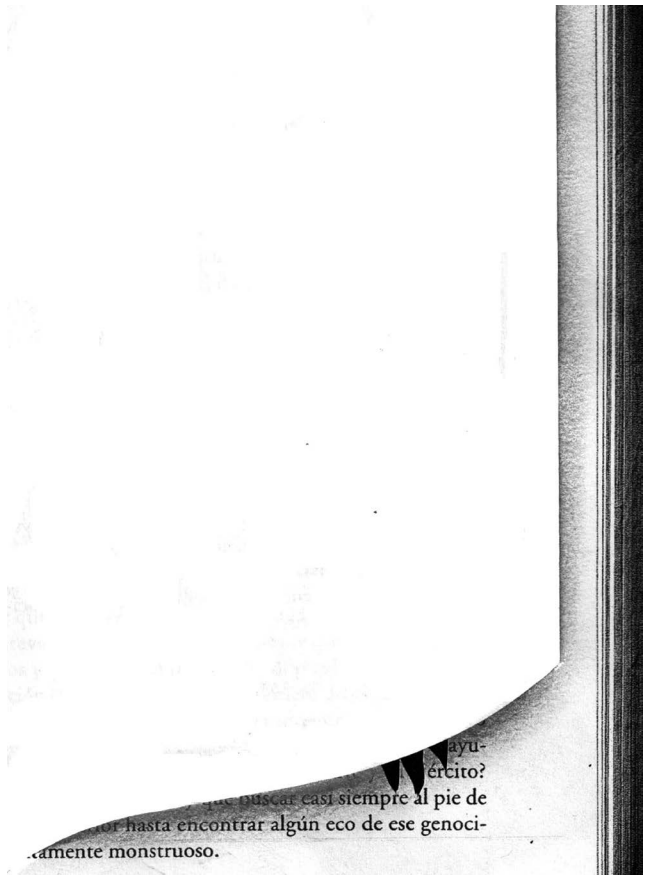

Fig. 1.4 Édgar Cano, 'Merovingio' from *Animalia*, written by Rafael Toriz and illustrated by Édgar Cano (Mexico City: Vanilla Planifolia, 2015), 91.

brought together before the more systematized collections of the Enlightenment period. *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos* (Bestiary: Fantastic Real Animals, 2008), a collaboration with the Cuban poet and essayist Juan Nicolás Padrón, is an anthology of legendary beasts and monsters associated with both the Old and the New Worlds. Like Borges's *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, Padrón's texts give prominence to mythology over morality. Padrón and Romo emphasize the diversity of imagined animals, but also point to their capacity to cross boundaries of language, culture, and religion, turning up in slightly different guises over the centuries, as if there were certain constants in the monsters that humans have invented. But the continual translation of these creatures

between the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms, between the natural and supernatural worlds, and between different cultures, creates a world that is ontologically plural, dynamic, and relational.

In the mediaeval bestiary, the correspondences that governed the natural world did not only allow animal behaviour to be infused with moral significance; they also emphasized the profound interconnections between living and non-living things that were evidenced in visual analogy. Natural entities often had "physical counterparts" in another stratum of life.[32] Until the end of the sixteenth century, as Foucault explains, emulation expressed "a sort of natural twinship existing in things."[33] Such correspondences still animated the descriptions to be found in early chronicles of the New World. In his monumental *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590), José de Acosta observes that "así como los metales son como plantas ocultas de la tierra, así también podemos decir que las plantas son como animales fijos en un lugar" (just as minerals are the hidden plants of the earth, so we can also say that plants are like animals fixed in one place).[34] This principle of analogy, through which "all the figures in the whole universe can be drawn together,"[35] is everywhere evident in the texts and illustrations of *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos*. When it is immobile, for example, we are told that the *aplanador* (rather like an elephant) can easily be confused with an enormous mossy rock. The entanglement of plant, animal, and mineral kingdoms is heightened in many of Romo's illustrations: the unicorn's horn appears as a thorny stem with roses emerging from it, and the form of the mandrake root replicates in minute detail the human digestive system and reproductive organs. This emulation is taken to an extreme by the Gigantic Sloth, which climbs so slowly that its fur fuses with the bark and tendrils of a tree (see Fig. 1.5); for this reason, "podría considerarse una prolongación de los centenarios árboles que abundan en los más intrincados lugares de la Amazonia" (it could be considered an extension of the centenarian trees that abound in the most impassable places of the Amazon).[36]

32 White, *The Book of Beasts*, 245.
33 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 19–20.
34 Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, 97.
35 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 22.
36 Padrón and Romo, *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos*, 49.

Fig. 1.5 Claudio Andrés Salvador Francisco Romo Torres, 'El perezoso' (detail) from *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos*, written by Juan Nicolás Padrón and illustrated by Claudio Andrés Salvador Francisco Romo Torres (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2008), 48.

In *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos*, American creatures (real and legendary) such as the glyptodon, the megatherium, the axolotl, and the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl are slipped in alongside sirens and satyrs, much in the way that Amerindian legends were worked into Baroque friezes in the New World. Another work authored and illustrated by Romo, *Bestiario mexicano* (Mexican Bestiary, 2018), develops a more explicit critique of coloniality and modernity through the presentation of a series of mythical Mayan creatures. Romo has little interest in excavating these myths to find the most authentic versions; instead, he draws attention to how myths are transformed or hybridized as a consequence of intercultural contact, and even how different mythical figures within the same cultural tradition swap attributes or merge with each other over time. Mayan monsters—like those everywhere—become a sign that refers to "the incessantly changing nature of reality, perceived as proteiform, metamorphic and never fully knowable."[37]

37 Romo Torres, *Bestiario mexicano*, 45.

Bestiario mexicano outlines a critique of the exclusions of Western modernity. Romo draws out the similarities between European paganism and Mesoamerican mythology: both are built on the "fusion" of the human world with the animal kingdom that is rejected in the more hierarchical conception of the cosmos inherent in Jewish and Christian traditions.[38] The myth of the "wild man," known in the Yucatán as the *sinsimito* (or the *sisimito* or the *sisimite*), is described by Romo as "foundational" because it represents "the perfect summary of the animality that we wanted to leave behind": the barbarism that we rejected "once we had crossed the frontier between the state of nature and that of culture, once we had built the walls of the City."[39] It is a myth that represents the dark side of modernity: the scapegoats that are repressed and excised in order to erect a divide between nature and culture, allowing certain groups to project a view of themselves as more rational, scientific, and civilized. Nature and culture are however confounded here in Romo's depiction of the hairy *sinsimito* as well-groomed, adorned with the "sumptuous and elaborate hairstyles" that had once been adopted by ancient inhabitants of the region, together with the stone jewels worn by its victims (see Fig. 1.6).[40]

Aníbal Quijano identifies the opposition between the state of nature and the state of civilization as the founding myth upon which Eurocentric narratives of modernity have been built. This myth gives rise to a belief in the unilinear nature of change and progress across human history, and enables Europeans to position themselves at the apex of civilization and to reorganize time, to such an extent that "todo lo no-europeo es percibido como pasado" (everything non-European is perceived as the past).[41] It is this conception of time that allows some societies to be depicted as backward, with their beliefs dismissed as irrational and irrelevant to the modern world. In contrast, myths and local beliefs in Romo's *Bestiario mexicano* are manifestly not relegated to a past that has been superseded by modernity, but exist with and within modernity.

The text describing the *aluxe* provides a clear example. Romo tracks recent claims of the continued activity of these impish demons in

38 Cenzi, "La natura del mostro," 4.
39 Romo Torres, *Bestiario mexicano*, 8, 10.
40 Romo Torres, 6.
41 Quijano, "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina," 220, 222.

Fig. 1.6 Claudio Andrés Salvador Francisco Romo Torres, 'Sinsimito' from *Bestiario mexicano*, trans. Federico Taibi (Modena: Logosedizione, 2018), 9.

Mexico today. In 2010, when the pop star Elton John was to perform at the ancient Mayan site of Chichén Itzá, part of the stage collapsed the day before the concert, injuring three technicians. Romo observes that the organizers had failed to ingratiate themselves with the *aluxe*. This was, in fact, the explanation given at the time by local Mayan leaders who considered the concert to be an irreverent and inappropriate use of sacred ruins for private profit, with ticket prices aimed at global elites.[42] Significantly, Romo notes that the importance of the *aluxe* in Mayan culture was strengthened with the arrival of the monotheistic Spanish, and that some ethnologists have suspected that they were "imported" by English colonists and pirates, only later to be adopted in indigenous mythology.[43] For this reason, the *aluxe* may not be considered antithetical

42 Gordon, "Elton John Concert at Chichen Itza Encounters Opposition."
43 Romo Torres, *Bestiario mexicano*, 18.

to modernity so much as a product of the capitalist-colonialist enterprise of modernity itself. Certainly, current-day *aluxe* in Romo's account have a clear role in drawing attention to cultural (mis)appropriation and structural inequality, helping to define the cultural and social injustices that have been exacerbated by contemporary forms of globalization and neocolonialism. The deployment of mythical Mayan figures as agents in this way opens up the possibility of alternative modernities that are more pluralistic.

Romo presents Mesoamerican ontologies as much more complex and integrated than European ones, particularly in their subtle understanding of the fluidity of relations between humans and nature, and between the natural and the supernatural, terms held rigidly apart in modern European thought since the Enlightenment. This is most clearly evident in the concept of the co-essence, which, Romo explains, is an animal or a celestial phenomenon (such as rain, lightning, or wind) that shares the consciousness of its owner. Such myths bear witness to "the inherent complexity of the Mesoamerican vision of the world, of the innumerable presences that inhabit it, of man himself understood as an integral part of this crowded natural and supernatural space."[44]

This vision of a world in which humans are fully woven into a plural reality, integrated with the natural and supernatural rather than separated from them, is also expressed in the modes of illustration employed by Romo, which continually cross divides between nature and art, nature and technology, myth and modernity. Highly textured, precise line-drawings of each mythical animal in *Bestiario mexicano* make use of techniques of hatching and cross-hatching that were common in early forms of printmaking (in etchings and engravings) and in some scientific illustrations (see Fig. 1.7). These techniques contrast with others that might be found in fantasy graphic novels, children's literature, and other forms of popular art, with rich colours and simple, whimsical designs. The depictions of creatures switch easily between the natural, the cultural, and the mechanical: the *waay pop*, a man who is able to transform himself into a bird, is shown first as a man with wings clearly strapped onto his back and a beak-shaped helmet (see Fig. 1.8); then as the static, stylized representation of a mythical figure, next as a being that genuinely seems to combine characteristics of a man and a bird, and finally fully transformed into a bird. The illustrations thus

44 Romo Torres, 45.

Fig. 1.7 Claudio Andrés Salvador Francisco Romo Torres, 'Waay Pop' from *Bestiario mexicano*, trans. Federico Taibi (Modena: Logosedizione, 2018), 37.

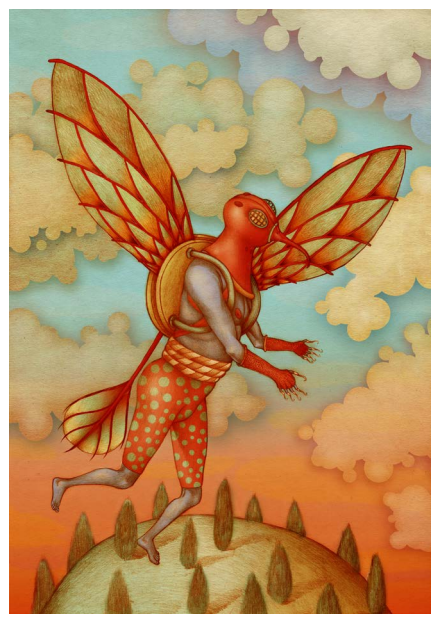

Fig. 1.8 Claudio Andrés Salvador Francisco Romo Torres, 'Waay Pop' from *Bestiario mexicano*, trans. Federico Taibi (Modena: Logosedizione, 2018), 38.

encode the ontological ambiguity of the *waay pop* and other co-essences: are these full metamorphoses in which one being is transformed into another, the acquisition of certain characteristics, or simply the donning of a disguise?

Transformations and exchanges in Romo's work often illustrate Amerindian concepts of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. As the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explains, while Western cosmologies are founded on a "physical continuity" between human and nonhuman bodies (we are all made of the same organic stuff) and a "metaphysical discontinuity" (only humans have spirits or minds), in Amerindian cultures, the reverse is the case. Humans and other beings in the cosmos share the same spiritual nature, while our bodies are what distinguish us.[45] This means that "the animal clothes that shamans or sorcerers use to travel the cosmos are not fantasies but instruments: they are akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not to carnival masks." The function of animal masks and other clothing is thus not to conceal, to disguise oneself, but to take on the "affects and capacities which define each animal."[46] Romo's illustrations clearly show this dynamic at work, as human wearers of masks and other coverings are not intending to hide their humanness, but to take on the functions and perspectives of other beings.

If myths may (re)animate our world and even articulate critical visions, however, they may also draw a convenient veil over the human origin of violence and destruction by furnishing these with a supernatural explanation. We are told in *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos* that the electric eel is responsible for a good number of fires that ravage the Amazon, and that when trees disappear in the forests of South America, the megatherium cannot be far away. Given our knowledge of the real causes of deforestation in the region, these suppositions are highly ironic. *Bestiario* closes with the statement that humanity was created by Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, whose need for human blood explains "tantos desastres" (so many disasters).[47] This submission of human destiny to the will of animals (real or supernatural) affords

45 Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native*, 260.
46 Viveiros de Castro, 278.
47 Padrón and Romo, *Bestiario: Animales reales fantásticos*, 70.

an alternative perspective on the anthropocentrism of our own era, however, which is nowhere more evident than in our ready assumption of guilt for all forms of ecological change and our self-appointed role as guardians of the future planet. Tim Ingold reminds us:

> a premise of totemic belief and cult is that it was the animals who made the world for man, who originally laid down the order and design of human social existence, and who are ultimately responsible for its continuation. The Western cult of conservation precisely inverts this premise, proclaiming that from now on it shall be man who determines the conditions of life for animals (even those still technically wild shall be "managed"), and who shoulders the responsibility for their survival or extinction.[48]

Undoubtedly wild and beyond our management, the animals of Romo's bestiaries retain much of the agency of which they have been stripped in modern Western imaginaries. They challenge a belief in human supremacy that has caused great damage to the natural world and that continues to underpin our attempts to rescue it.

Walmor Corrêa: Cryptozoology for a Disenchanted World

The legendary beasts created in Walmor Corrêa's artistic projects are often inspired by the letters and chronicles written by sixteenth-century European travellers and missionaries to Brazil. Corrêa's reinsertion of Brazilian popular and indigenous imaginaries within modern scientific modes of illustration mischievously elevates the folkloric and the fantastic, which have been systematically excluded from the canons of modern European knowledge since the Enlightenment. His bestiaries, full of hybrid beings and cryptids old and new, may be read as parodies of the taxonomic and anatomical zeal of eighteenth-century Western science, but also as a more serious attempt to reweave different forms of knowledge together and to recapture a sense of the marvellous that animates early colonial accounts of the New World, sorely needed in a disenchanted modern era.

48 Ingold, "Introduction," 12.

In his work, Corrêa has been particularly drawn to the letters of Padre José de Anchieta, a Jesuit missionary who spent several decades evangelizing the Indian population of Brazil in the second half of the sixteenth century. Anchieta is credited with being one of the founders of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro; he was also a pioneering linguist, ethnographer, and naturalist. In the Jesuit tradition of report-writing, he sent exhaustively detailed letters to his superiors on the customs of indigenous communities and the flora and fauna of Brazil. Corrêa cites one such epistle, the *Carta de São Vicente* (1560), as the motivation for many of his artistic works. Anchieta's account in this letter of a journey into the Mata Atlântica, the forest that extends along Brazil's Atlantic coast, is a pre-Enlightenment medley of methodical observations and fabulous tales. He pays close attention to the animals he encounters—in folktales and in the flesh—and attempts to systematize his knowledge, roughly grouping species together according to their type or habitat.

Maria Esther Maciel finds that such syntheses of animal knowledge in the Renaissance were typically a jumble of precise descriptions, arbitrary classifications, citations, fables, myths, and observations about the possible uses of animals in both medicine and magic, in which new forms of classification—still very much in formation—had not erased a lively interest in the fabulous as explored in the mediaeval bestiary or the zoological findings of natural philosophers from antiquity.[49] Like these, Anchieta's texts were written in an era in which knowledge of the natural and supernatural worlds came from much more diverse sources, and in which marvels were a proper object for scientific exploration, not the target of suspicion.

Having survived the adversities of a stormy sea passage and evaded the attention of diverse and deadly snakes, Anchieta musters a range of superlatives to account for the new and wondrous animals he encounters, which boast the sharpest nails or teeth, the stoutest legs, or the tastiest flesh. Unlike his eighteenth-century successors, who would catalogue species according to European classification systems, Anchieta prefers to use local Indian names. While accounts of scientific expeditions in the later colonial period extracted species from their natural, social, and cultural environments, focusing primarily on their commercial potential for Europe, Anchieta describes the uses the Indians found for each

49 Maciel, "Imagens zoológicas da América Latina," 90.

animal: often to eat, but also to make belts or shields, or to incite sexual pleasure. He displays an evident admiration for indigenous medicine and hunting and fishing techniques.

Recognizing that some of the extraordinary incidents he relates may stretch his readers' credulity, Anchieta insists at several points that he and his Jesuit brothers have witnessed them at first hand. An Indian cure for ulcers has been "provado com experiência" (demonstrated by experience); likewise, a snake so huge that it may easily swallow a deer is "observado por todos" (observed by all).[50] The same claims are made about phenomena that stray into the realm of the supernatural. Although Anchieta and his Jesuit brothers attempt to convert the Indians they meet to the Christian faith, they give at least partial credence to local beliefs concerning demons, or strange beasts that threaten them. "É cousa sabida e pela bôca corre" (it is a well-known fact and on everyone's lips) that the Indians are whipped and beaten to death by *corupiras*, and Anchieta affirms that his brothers can testify to this, having seen several Indians killed by them in this way.[51] Equally murderous are the water-dwelling *igpupiáras*, who drowned many members of an Indian community before Christians moved into the area. Indeed, Anchieta believes these monsters to be nothing less than incarnations of the Devil, who oppresses those who do not know God with "cruel tirania" (cruel tyranny) of this kind.[52]

The physical features of the dreaded *igpupiára* and *corupira* (or *curupira*, as it is more commonly known) are not described by Anchieta. Both creatures are minutely portrayed, however, in Corrêa's series *Unheimlich, imaginário popular brasileiro* (Unhomely, Popular Brazilian Imaginary, 2005), alongside other monsters and hybrids that live on in Brazilian folklore and popular culture.[53] In creating these works, Corrêa turned to another important intertext, Luís da Câmara Cascudo's *Geografia dos mitos brasileiros* (1947). He represents the *curupira* in one of the regional versions detailed by da Câmara Cascudo, with its feet

50 Anchieta, *Carta de São Vicente 1560*, 19, 17.
51 Anchieta, 34.
52 Anchieta, 35.
53 The full series was first exhibited in 2006 as part of the *Cryptozoology—Out of Time Place Scale* exhibition at the Bates College Museum of Art (Lewiston, Maine) and the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute (Missouri), curated by Mark Bessire and Raechell Smith.

facing backwards, one eye and no anus (see Fig. 1.9).[54] The figures in the *Unheimlich* series are depicted as they might be presented in an anatomy textbook. A large frontal view of the body dominates a plain white background, often with part of the torso pulled back to show the inner organs or a limb shown without skin to reveal joints and muscles. This central figure is flanked by smaller illustrations in multiple projections, showing details of anatomical structures, each labelled in meticulous handwriting. In this way, Corrêa treats his chimerical creatures with the gravity of a scientific treatise, lending them veracity through anatomical precision.

It has become a commonplace to assert that monsters are often ciphers for that which threatens ontological boundaries and confounds the neat ordering of classification systems.[55] In Corrêa's annotated illustrations, in contrast, science steps up to the challenge of analysing the fantastical. Noting some of the anatomical features that the *capelobo* shares with humans, the written descriptions point to the limited rotation of the head on the neck, given the elongated form of the *capelobo*'s cranium, and explain how the jaw moves to accommodate food when eating.[56] In his description of the amphibian *ipupiara*,[57] Corrêa notes the flexible skeleton but adds coyly that details of the articulation of the flipper will be better understood when it has been properly dissected. To develop his work on the *ondina* (siren), Corrêa consulted medical specialists to explore the possible anatomy of a mermaid.[58] How would its body be able to withstand the higher pressures of deep water? What would its foetus look like? He adds gills behind the ears, near the carotid arteries, to allow the hyperoxygenation of blood flowing to the brain while the siren is below water, and adapts the eye for lower levels of light, removing tear glands as the cornea would be continually washed with water.

Corrêa's *Unheimlich* series therefore takes to an extreme the transcultural and transdisciplinary elements of Anchieta's text, finding

55 See, for example, Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 7.

56 The *capelobo* is given a human frame here, with the long snout of the anteater and the rounded feet that it acquires in some regions of Brazil, according to da Câmara Cascudo. *Geografia dos Mitos Brasileiros*, 404.

57 Da Câmara Cascudo, 254–84.

58 Conversation with the author, 28 April 2019.

54 Da Câmara Cascudo, *Geografia dos Mitos Brasileiros*, 180–82.

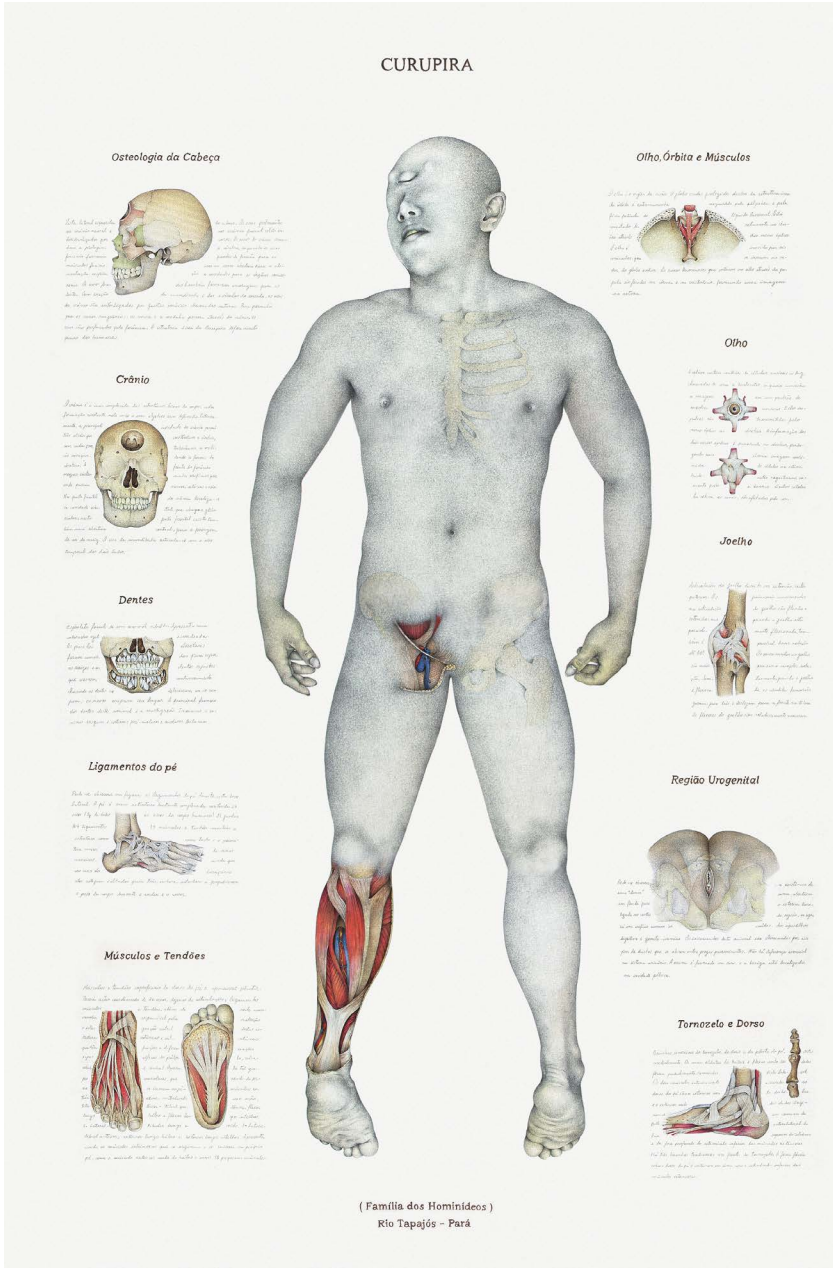

Fig. 1.9 Walmor Corrêa, *Curupira* from *Unheimlich: Imaginário popular brasileiro* (2005). Acrylic and graphic on canvas, 195 x 130 cm.

room within a Western scientific idiom for the popular, the alien, and the supernatural: locating strangeness in the familiar, much like Freud's theory of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny). The effect is utterly incongruous. If, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us, "the monstrous body is pure culture" and it is "a construct and a projection,"[59] then the anatomical description of its body parts is comically irrelevant. The irony derives from our understanding that the physiological analysis of a monster's vital organs will tell us nothing of how monsters signify. And yet to render the fabulous creatures of folktales with such zoological rigour and fidelity is also to question how and why scientific modes of expression and analysis have become so estranged from everyday beliefs and lore. It is also to mount a semi-serious—if speculative—investigation into nonhuman forms of perception and knowledge. Maciel finds in the work of Wilson Bueno (a Brazilian writer) and Francisco de Toledo (the illustrator of Borges's *Manual de zoología fantástica*) an intent to develop "uma espécie de *razãoanimal*" (a kind of animal-logic) on the basis of a knowledge that is thoroughly embodied and sensory.[60] Corrêa's interest in the precise anatomies of his creatures, like Toriz's recourse to neurobiological research on the crocodile's sensory organs, stems from a lively curiosity about how knowledge is created through multiple sensory interactions with our environment.

Corrêa had already developed his work on animal hybrids in *Natureza perversa* (*Perverse Nature*, 2003), which adopts the conventions of zoological illustration to explore the possible anatomies of invented species, such as the *pinguisch* (which combines the head of a fish with the lower body of a penguin; see Fig. 1.10) and the *schnabelaffe* (a beaked monkey), and to speculate on their bizarre mating habits.[61] Rekindling a pre-Enlightenment fascination with the monstrous, these inventions speak to an early colonial imaginary in which composites and mixtures were rife, arising from encounters with otherness. Hybridization, along with spontaneous generation, were the two main theories proposed to explain the existence of animals in the New World that did not appear in the Old one, and were therefore unaccounted for in the original

59 Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 4.
60 Maciel, "Imagens zoológicas da América Latina," 95.
61 *Natureza perversa* was exhibited as a solo show at the Museu de Arte do Rio Grande do Sul Ado Malagoli (MARGS) in 2003.

Creation.[62] The continued belief in interspecies hybridization, a matter of lengthy discourse and debate across the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods, is clear evidence of the priority given to theology over zoology in scholarship throughout this time.[63]

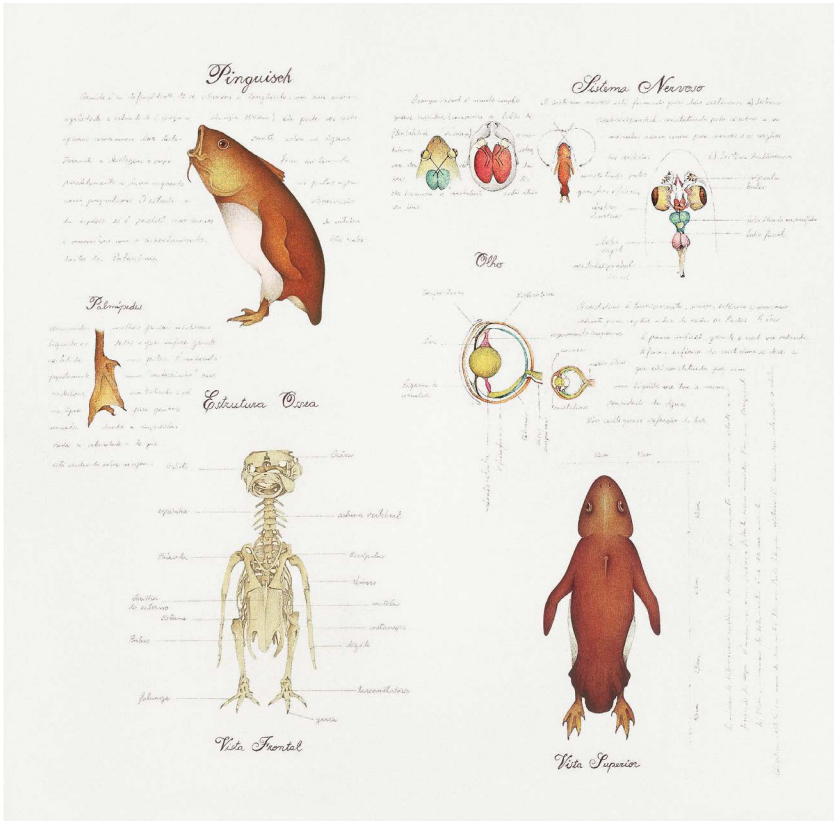

Fig. 1.10 Walmor Corrêa, *Pinguisch* from *Natureza perversa* (2003). Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 80 x 80 cm (photograph by Fabio del Re).

If these creatures largely resulted from the projection of European fears, desires, and theological debates onto the New World, what interest might contemporary Latin American writers and artists have in resurrecting such beasts? For Maciel, the fantastical creatures that swarmed across the pages of European chronicles of the New World

62 Enenkel, "The Species and Beyond," 99.
63 See Enenkel, 59, 68–83.

sprang from "uma insuficiência epistemológica" (an epistemological failure).[64] Sixteenth-century systems of knowledge could not assimilate "a *alteridade* radical dos animais latino-americanos" (the radical *alterity* of Latin American animals) within the existing categories of rational knowledge.[65] And yet, Maciel wonders if contemporary revivals of the bestiary in Latin America might hark back in an ironic mode to systems of classification that predate the triumph of scientific rationalism, precisely in order to denounce the failings of modern forms of knowledge.[66] This certainly appears to be a crucial motive in Corrêa's *Unheimlich* series. It is evident that the deficiency signalled here is on the part of modern, post-Enlightenment zoologists, whose expertise in anatomy has been cultivated through an absolute separation of the discipline from other realms of knowledge and experience: cultural, spiritual, and social.

There is also a clear interest in Corrêa's work in finding in the many errors and exaggerations of early colonial accounts something of value for our own time, namely the experience of being overwhelmed by diversity and disoriented by the unexplained. His recycling of colonial fantasies allows us to appreciate the "ideological malleability" that Stephen Greenblatt accords to wonder, as both "a sign of dispossession" and "an agent of appropriation."[67] If in Columbus's account of the New World the language of wonder is central to rituals of possession, Greenblatt wishes to reserve the possibility that it may also signify other kinds of relation with the world, as "the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete."[68]

Importantly, Corrêa's work does not only explore the hybrid and fabulous animals that European travellers spied in the Americas, but also those that emerge from indigenous traditions and from the contact between two cultures. Like Anchieta, several early colonial chroniclers assimilated indigenous legends and taxonomies in their descriptions of the natural world. The work of Francisco Hernández (1514–1587), the only scientist to have written a natural history of the New World in the sixteenth century, is a synthesis of European classificatory systems and indigenous nomenclature, often relying on local Indian knowledge of

64 Maciel, "Imagens zoológicas da América Latina," 90.
65 Maciel, 90.
66 Maciel, 92.
67 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 24.
68 Greenblatt, 24.

new animals and plants.[69] Its incorporation of Aztec legends relating to the hidden powers of animals presented no difficulty to his readers, as "The Renaissance image of nature, with its insistence on its plastic power, its 'secrets' and the possibility of its control through natural magic, could accommodate part of the native lore with which many of the conceptual and literary representations of New World animals were invested."[70]

Corrêa's own hybridizing work therefore stretches back to a moment of greater fluidity and exchange, before such beliefs, along with local names and cultural uses, were erased in the Enlightenment bid for objectivity and a universal nomenclature. The use of new Latin names to replace the "vivid vernacular names" that ordinary people had used to refer to the animals and plants around them widened the increasing gulf between learned and popular views of the natural world.[71] Indeed, serious eighteenth-century naturalists became "contemptuous of popular lore."[72] The imbrication of science and folklore in Corrêa's work constructs an alternative path that modernity might have followed instead, one that is less exclusionary and hierarchical. An emphasis on myths of indigenous origin also characterizes Wilson Bueno's *Jardim zoológico* (Brazil, 1999). But where Bueno seeks to dismantle the taxonomies of natural history in favour of orderings that arise from the subjective, the anecdotal, from memory or from dreams, Corrêa brings the scientific and the mythical together in a more genuine attempt to bridge the chasm that has separated them in modernity. Studying the contemporary bestiaries composed by Bueno and other Latin America writers, Maciel finds that the exoticizing gaze of the New World chroniclers is reappropriated "como traço constitutivo de uma identidade disforme, heteróclita, paradoxal" (as a defining trace of a deformed, heteroclite, paradoxical identity).[73] There is little attempt on the part of Corrêa—or indeed, on that of Toriz and Romo—to reclaim hybridity or the fantastic as defining characteristics of Latin American identity, however. Corrêa extends his *Unheimlich* series to include popular figures from US (and global) culture, including Spiderman and the arch villain Penguin from the Batman comics.

69 De Asúa and French, *A New World of Animals*, 101.
70 De Asúa and French, 234.
71 Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 81.
72 Thomas, 80.
73 Maciel, "Imagens zoológicas da América Latina," 93.

In his analysis of mediaeval animal imaginaries in literary descriptions of American nature, Hernando Cabarcas Antequera argues that early travellers found mysteries and miracles in the New World because they had started to disappear from the Old one. If God was no longer visibly manifest in European nature, in the luxuriant landscapes of America "la naturaleza vuelve a mostrar y a predecir" (nature begins to reveal and to foretell again) and signs of Providence were everywhere to be seen.[74] The monsters that Europeans saw may not only have emerged from the exaggeration of cultural and racial difference, but also from a need to reanimate a world that was fast becoming predictable. Comparing the study of monsters in the ancient world and in the present, Peter Dendle finds that "in the classical period the zoology of the hidden and unconfirmed reflected anxiety about how vast and frightening the world was. This stands in sharp contrast to contemporary cryptozoology, which serves rather as a marker of how weary many people are with a world over-explored, over-tamed, and over-understood."[75]

In the introduction to their exhibition on the art of cryptozoology, Raechell Smith and Mark Bessire note in a very similar vein that we are now not confronted with the unknown so much as "plagued by a weariness of absolute certainties," and that artists who stage a search for new species invite us to engage again in "wonder, speculation, and wishful thinking."[76] Since the mid-nineteenth century, when the last areas of land were mapped, and the start of the twentieth century, when most large species living on land had been catalogued, we have moved into an era in which the populations and habitats of most terrestrial animals are known to us.[77] This has produced a profound change in our relationship with the natural world, as well as with geographical space. Dendle argues that an important role for cryptozoology in contemporary times is "to repopulate liminal space with potentially undiscovered creatures that have resisted human devastation."[78] If there might be species that have somehow escaped human detection, then "we feel a little humbler about our ability to alter the natural biosphere and, perhaps, a little less guilty about the damage we have inflicted on it."[79]

74 Cabarcas Antequera, *Bestiario del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, 45.
75 Dendle, "Cryptozoology in the Medieval and Modern Worlds," 193.
76 Smith and Bessire, "Introduction," 11.
77 Dendle, "Cryptozoology in the Medieval and Modern Worlds," 197.
78 Dendle, 198.
79 Dendle, 198.

Many of Corrêa's projects allow us to glimpse this possibility. The texts composed for the *Natureza perversa* series do not only present us with bizarre, undiscovered creatures that shy away from human contact, but also give details of their ingenious survival tactics. The *Apterogiformes Aco II* (a flightless bird) is a hybrid of two almost-extinct species that were able to mate because of their genetic similarity, thus increasing their chances of survival. The *Schnabelspringer* (a beaked bird-rodent with powerful hind legs) shares the care of its young with other mothers on a weekly rota, which is effective in securing the continuity of the species. The *Möve mit Krallem* (Gull with Claws) may even have been the result of genetic experiments carried out by biologists in the Bikini Islands after nuclear testing.

There is a risk, of course, that Corrêa's spirited celebration of all things hybrid might create a utopian vision of liminality and cross-cultural encounters that skips too quickly over the real violence of colonial relations. In 2013, he created another hybrid in the style of the *Unheimlich* series, a woman-lizard entitled *Salamanca do Jarau*, in reference to a legend of some importance in the south of Brazil (see Fig. 1.11). According to the story, a Moorish princess with magical gifts (also called the Teiniaguá) arrives from Spain and is turned into a lizard by indigenous people to demonstrate their superior power; she continues to grant the wishes of those who visit her cave. In developing the work, Corrêa conducted research alongside doctors and a community association based in Barcelona on the health issues experienced by Latin American women immigrants. Common problems included alcoholism, chronic back pain, infertility, and the deformation of hands through too much manual labour. These were shown in red in the relevant area of the figure of the *Salamanca do Jarau*, in a testament to the suffering of current-day migrants for whom the hoped-for fulfilment of their desires has turned into something more monstrous, born of the poverty, inequality, and discrimination that mark reverse migrations from Latin America to Spain within the enduring legacy of coloniality.

Once common currency in colonial accounts of the New World, marking out the frontiers of modern civilization, the monstrous is reclaimed in Corrêa's work for decolonial purposes: to reweave histories of knowledge that have been torn apart in the imposition of a dominant, secular, Enlightenment science, to recreate the natural world as a site of

Fig. 1.11 Walmor Corrêa, *Teiniaguá, vista dorsal* from *Salamanca do Jarau* (2013). Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 90 x 110 cm (photograph by Hugo Curti).

excess, entanglement, and enchantment that confounds our attempts to tame it, and also to testify to the human suffering that continues to result from the forms of displacement and dispossession produced by global capitalism.

Conclusion

Twenty-first-century composers of bestiaries in Latin America have borrowed from the imaginaries of mediaeval bestiaries and the imperial fantasies of early New World chronicles in a quest to re-enchant the world, as a vital step toward learning to act differently in relation to it. The images they create and curate point to myths that are continually mutating and available to repurpose for our own times. The format of the illustrated book (or in Corrêa's case, the annotated illustration) heightens the possibilities for polyvalency. Indeed, in mediaeval bestiaries, the illustrations often added to the indeterminacy of meaning, with frequent discrepancies between texts and images that may have been the result of misunderstandings, the incorporation of images from other accounts or even the artist's deliberate attempt to contradict the text.[80] In the bestiaries discussed here, the image often strikes a different tone to the text, making a metaphor literal or lending a fantastical air to a zoological description, or introducing styles of illustration that seem out of time and place. Like the work of Borges's Pierre Menard, who rewrites the *Quijote* three centuries after its publication, to recompose the mediaeval bestiary in the twenty-first century is to lend it an even greater richness and ambiguity.

Perhaps the most surprising tactic used in these bestiaries is a recourse to anthropomorphic fables in which animals take on human characteristics and motives. Anthropomorphism is often associated with the childlike, magical view of the world embedded in fables, in which animals speak, embody human values or become the bearers of moral lessons. As the act of projecting human emotion and experience onto other species, anthropomorphism has come to be considered at best a category mistake, and at worst a perpetuation of anthropocentrism, our incapacity to grasp the otherness of nonhumans and the value of

80 Brown, "Bestiary Lessons on Pride and Lust," 54.

their different perspectives and capacities. It remains true, however, that the bestiaries of old often depicted animals as wiser and more skilled than their human readers. Inspired by the Biblical book of Proverbs, *Physiologus* enjoins its readers to emulate the discretion of ants; indeed, "irrational animals and weak reptiles" behave with such prudence that "all are found to be clever and wise."[81] Finding traits in animals that we share, or skills that surpass our own, may help us to recognize our common inheritance and allow us to think about alternative ways of being human.

But more broadly, as Kellie Robertson argues, "the unraveling of the old humanist certainties offers a chance to look afresh at what premodern models of nature have to offer to more recent models of environmental criticism."[82] The common recourse to anthropomorphic personification in mediaeval literature is one case in point: rather than representing a naïve narcissism, Robertson suggests that it often became a critical means "to explore what counts as human and what as nature" as well as "a tool for teasing apart the very subtle ontological threads that link earthly creatures of different kinds."[83] In more recent times, it has perhaps been environmental criticism that has voiced the strongest objections to the personification and humanization of nature. As it was the Enlightenment search for objectivity that demanded the separation between humans and nonhumans, however, Robertson proposes that a hostility toward anthropomorphism "makes strange bedfellows of environmental critics and the Enlightenment thinkers whom they otherwise seek to debunk."[84]

More profoundly, the central revelation of the Anthropocene is, of course, the extent to which humans are indeed becoming the designers and producers of the natural world. In his introduction to *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings* (2012), Caspar Henderson points out that "as we increasingly reshape Creation through science and technology, not to mention our sheer numbers, the creatures that do thrive and evolve are, increasingly, corollaries of our values and concerns."[85] In secular Western

81 Curley, *Physiologus*, 21.
82 Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, 342.
83 Robertson, 343.
84 Robertson, 343.
85 Henderson, *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings*, xviii–xix.

societies we may not believe now that animals are manifestations of moral and religious lessons. But in the context of the current extension of our powers over the rest of the planet, "The Enlightenment and the scientific method will, therefore, have made possible the creation of a world that really will be allegorical because we will have remade it in the shadow of our values and priorities."[86]

Toriz and Cano, Padrón and Romo, and Corrêa return to mediaeval and early colonial genres in a quest to re-embed animals in our social and spiritual lives. Reflecting on José de Anchieta's sixteenth-century letters from Brazil, Paulo De Assunção observes that he is not interested in classifying the diverse species he encounters or in analysing the relationships between them. His principal concern is to describe how they may be used for food, or in other words, how they are placed "ao serviço do homem" (at the service of man).[87] For this reason, De Assunção finds that Anchieta's descriptions of the animal world "tendem a reforçar o sentido de posse" (tend to reinforce the sense of possession).[88] We may choose to read Anchieta's descriptions differently, however, if we compare them with modern approaches to zoology since the Enlightenment. Eighteenth-century taxonomies were to describe animals in ways that were more detached and less overtly anthropocentric, striving to classify animals according to their physical characteristics rather than their human uses. This objectivity was to parallel, and to reinforce, the growing separation between humans and animals in everyday life in the technologically developed world. It is this disconnection, born out of a conviction of disparity, that Corrêa, Romo, Toriz, and their collaborators seek to reverse.

86 Henderson, xix.
87 De Assunção, *A terra dos brasis*, 179.
88 De Assunção, 183.